

The Silence Of Scriptures

By Steve Higginbotham

Without a common understanding of how the Bible authorizes, even the most earnest desire and irenic spirit are insufficient to attain and maintain unity. A brief examination of our own history over the past 150 years will bear this out. A little more than a century ago, the United States Census Bureau, for the first time, listed Churches of Christ and Christian Churches as two separate religious bodies. This official recognition of the division that existed between Churches of Christ and Christian Churches was the culmination of half a century of disagreement over how the Scriptures authorize; in other words, how to interpret the “silence” of the Scriptures.

How is one to understand “silence” after God has already spoken? Is “silence” prohibitive or permissive? Is “silence” intentional or incidental? Disagreement over this fundamental issue is what divided us 100 years ago, and continues to keep us separated today.

However, let’s allow the Scriptures to answer this question for us and allow it to be its own interpreter.

Jeremiah, the prophet was told to stand in the gate of the temple and to urge the people to “Amend your ways...” (Jeremiah 7:3). What ways did they need to amend? According to Jeremiah 7:31, they had built high places upon which to burn their sons and daughters. But note the principle or rationale by which God condemns their action. God said they were guilty of doing that “which ***I did not command***, nor did it come into My heart.” Their condemnation was not based upon the explicit prohibition of idolatry, but rather was based on the equivalent practice of doing that which the Lord had not commanded.

In Leviticus 10:1-2, Nadab and Abihu sinned by ignoring this principle of silence. They offered strange fire before the Lord “which He had not commanded them.” By doing that which the Lord had ***not commanded*** them, they were found guilty. Nowhere did God say, “You cannot use this fire.” However what God did do is tell them what fire they were supposed to use, and there was no permission to be found in God’s silence about other fires.

I challenge all men to heed the words of the Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter (1615-1691) who stated, “For what man, dare go in a way which has neither precept nor example to warrant it? Can that be obedience which has no command for it...O, the pride of man’s heart, that instead of being a law-obeyer, will be a law-maker! For my part, I will not fear that God will be angry with me for doing no more than He has commanded me, and sticking close to the rule of His word, in matter of worship; but I should tremble to add or diminish!” (Baxter, 24)

May we have such reverence for God and his authority that we might all tremble at the very thought of adding to or diminishing from God’s word!